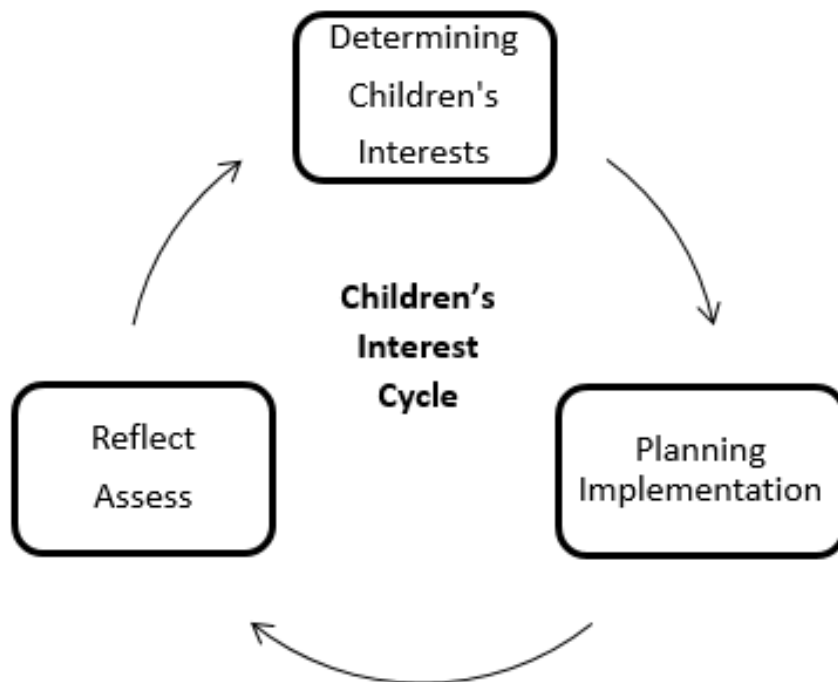


Determining and Using Children's Interests to Plan

Children's interests are discovered by listening to children, observing what they are engaged in, and talking with children. Teachers can also encourage children's interests by suggesting ideas, introducing new items and experiences or offering authentic opportunities for children to explore. Helm (2008) shares that "when children are engaged, they are excited and intensely involved in learning experiences that are meaningful to them; they take responsibility for their own learning and feel energized." Learning is easier for children when new knowledge is connected to what they already know.



Determining Children's Interests requires knowledge of individual children, observational skills, confidence in asking thought provoking questions, and intentional decision making. Teachers promote conversations with children by listening to them, validating what they have to say, expanding on their language and supporting them in making connections. Strasser & Bresson state, "knowing when and how to ask good questions requires preparation" (2017). Observing children in their play, who they are playing with, and any challenges they are experiencing will help to formulate questions to learn more about what interests them and how to extend their learning.

*Guiding questions to ask teachers about **determining children's interests**:*

- What are some classroom practices that help you to discover children's interests?
- What do children's actions and behaviors demonstrate about their interests and levels of engagement?
- How can discovering children's interests support learning in ways that are developmentally appropriate, relevant and engaging?
- Are children's interests evident during child directed learning experiences?
- How can the development and use of children's interests be considered as a classroom management tool?
- What are some strategies for involving families in learning about the interests of their children?



While talking about the weather, a couple of children mentioned watching The Weather Channel with their family. The class decided to create their own in the Dramatic Play area. The teacher brought her camera and tripod, and the children took videos of each other sharing the weather forecast.



Children independently decided to create blueprints for their buildings in blocks.

Planning and Implementation: Planning for instruction based on children's interests creates strong, trusting connections that build relationships and promote learning. Teachers use their knowledge of what children need to learn (NC Foundations for Early Learning and Development) and where children are developmentally, as guides to planning learning experiences that incorporate children's interests within units of study or as stand-alone learning opportunities. Building on children's preferences and evolving interests includes looking for potential materials that can be added to learning centers as well as to daily activities.

*Guiding questions to ask teachers about **planning and implementation:***

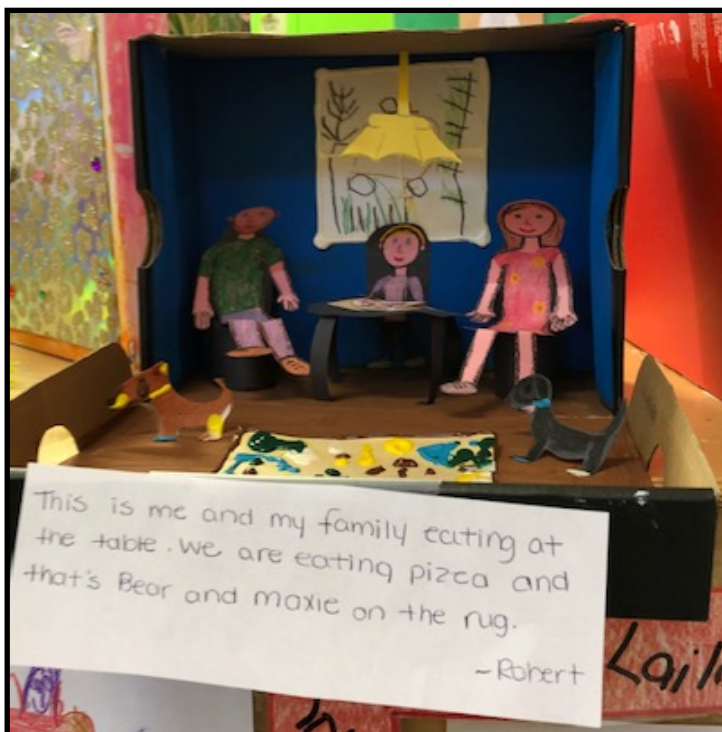
- What connection can you make between embedding children's interests and greater engagement in learning experiences throughout the classroom?
- How can you consistently build upon the interests and experiences of children when planning instruction? How might you note these on your lesson plans?
- How can you use Foundations and its Guiding Principles, goals, Developmental Indicators, and Strategies for Preschoolers to support children's interests throughout the classroom?
- How can you use children's interests to support planning for peer partners and learning teams?
- How can children's interests be embedded within topics of study?
- How do you know when it is time to change, rotate or add materials to learning centers?
- How might you track or keep up with what happens as a result of your planning?

The Children's Interest Cycle begins again.....

Challenges that teachers have experienced in using their children's interests as a way to guide planning:

- **"I won't have the money, supplies, or books to support all their ideas or interests."** Children's interests are diverse and based on their own experiences. Utilizing resources from your local library, the students' families, community partners, other teachers, or even creating them with the children in the classroom are all ways to begin to create interesting resources. Sending out a letter ahead of time for support allows families and community members to become more involved.
- **"I don't know anything about this."** As teachers of young children, we often face topics that we do not have any prior information about. This would be a great time to say, "I don't know, let's find out together!" Encourage research by the children at home with their families, and begin planning and developing ideas together during group, meal, or center time.
- **"What if their interest is... (too broad, too limited, not interesting to everyone)?"** Some very important aspects of being an early childhood educator are flexibility and planning.

Some topics may hold the children's interest for a few days, but some may last months. Some topics need to be expanded, but others may need to be more focused. Animals, for instance, is a comprehensive topic, but it could be explored through documentation, class discussion, observation, and listening to what the students might want to investigate.



Families were asked to use a shoe box to create a Family Interest Box, showing what the family likes to do together. This family likes to eat pizza together.

Additional strategies and discussion points about determining children's interests can be found by clicking [here](#).

Resources:

- Helm, J. (2008). Got Standards? Don't give up on Engaged Learning. *Young Children*, v63 n4
- Strasser, J. and Bresson, M. (2017). *Big Questions for Young Minds: Extending Children's Thinking*. NAEYC: Washington, DC.
- Please be sure to also visit the [EESLPD Useful Resources](#) tab of our website to explore the Children's Interests section under Mentor/Evaluator Additional Resources

Special thanks to Joanie Oliphant & Mistie Cogbill, our guest contributors to this month's Mentor Minute